19: Marshall M-6 (ca. 1910) 1923 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

342
782 64
[539]

THE KAREN PEOPLE OF BURMA

"Go away, all evil spirits.
Depart, all devils.
We and our children are going to stay here.
Do not remain near. Go. Go."

The members of each family then take up the various household tasks, including the building of the fireplace. If this is not completed the same night, they tie up their wrists to keep their "k'las" from wandering away and finish it the next morning. This is done among the Karen of Siam.

342 In the preceding pages of this chapter I have attempted to give a description of the Karen village-house. I do not say "home," for the Karen language has no word for home. The house is, however, something more than the eating and sleeping place of the village families: it is the center of their domestic life and worship and as such possesses a certain amount of sanctity. From what has been said above, it is clear that the village structure displays no attempts at artistic decoration, and is not made attractive by any of the touches that give so rich a meaning to the word "home" among Christians. The Karen bamboo house, located in a tropical climate as it is, affords a certain amount of physical comfort: the breezes blow through its airy walls, and one may lounge and gossip within during the heat of the day and not experience great oppression. At night, when the cool air begins to make itself felt, the open fire with its cheerful blaze attracts the story-teller, while out in the shadows the youthful lover strums his harp, and the children and the dogs play about in sufficient quietness not to disturb their elders.

231 262 Everywhere common dogs are kept by the Karen. These are the ordinary smooth-haired pariah hounds, which are familiar to the traveler in all parts of the peninsula. Besides these there are the hunting-dogs, mentioned in the chapter on Hunting and Fishing.[1] Only in recent days have the Karen shown any inclination to raise cats. In the early days they professed not to eat these felines; but I can testify that, whatever their former antipathies to the cat tribe may have been in this regard, they no longer hesitate to eat the wild varieties of cats that are to be caught in the jungle. They also find rats palatable.

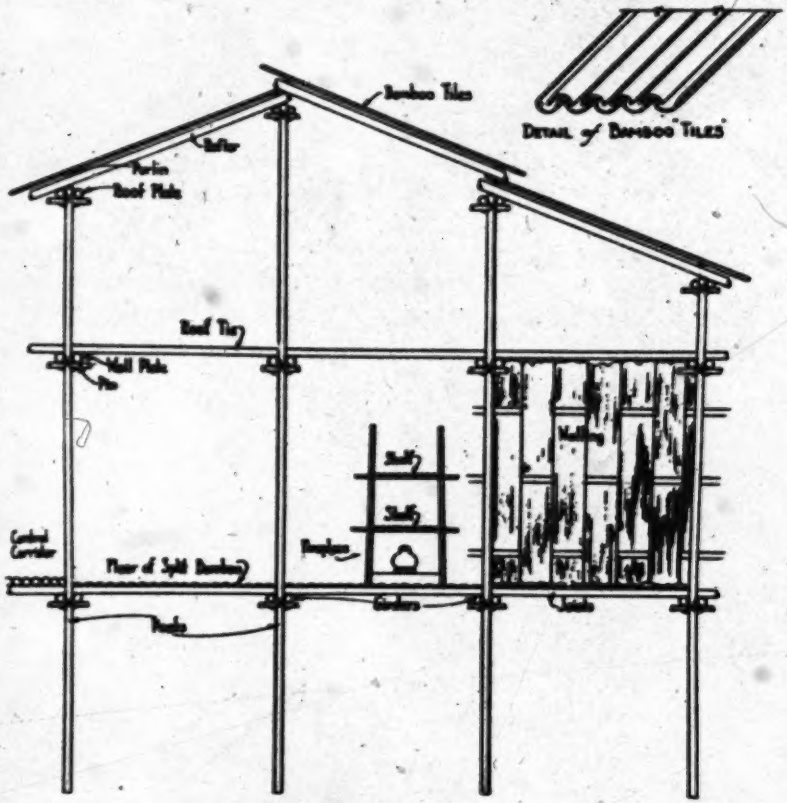
Pigs and fowls are the most common domestic animals among the Karen. Dr. Mason speaks of the pigs as being of the "small Chinese variety."[2] They are the property of the women and know

[1] See p. 182.
[2] *Journal, Asiatic Society of Bengal*, XXXVII, Pt. II, 128.

19: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

their mistress's voice. When a woman dies, her pigs are killed in order that their "k' las" may accompany her into the next world. The fowls are of a variety not unlike the wild jungle-fowls found all over the country.

On the plains buffaloes have been extensively bred for use as draft animals and in cultivating the paddy-fields. As they are slow-going creatures the small native oxen, often mistakenly identified with the "sacred ox" from having a hump like the cattle supposed to have been used in ancient Israel, have largely superseded them for draft purposes. In the Toungoo Hills oxen are employed to some extent as pack-animals, especially by the Paku tribe. Both the Paku and their neighbors, the Mawnepgha, raise a few goats, while the Red Karen are breeders of ponies to some extent.



Side View of
A Bamboo-Karen House
Kamamaung 1917

19: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

CHAPTER IX

FOOD AND ITS PREPARATION

262 The dietary of the Karen includes almost everything edible in the way of vegetables that grow in their country. A great variety of fish, birds, and animals are also partaken of; but it should be said at once that three-fourths, if not seven-eighths, of the amount of food they consume is rice, of which they raise many varieties. Next to rice they resort in time of need to millet, maize, and roots, especially yams of different kinds. Besides gourds, squashes, egg-plant, roselle, sweet potatoes, and the edible fruits, the Karen eat the tender shoots of many plants and trees, including the bamboo.

All kinds of fish and eels, some varieties of crabs, snakes, locusts, and grasshoppers, snails and other mollusks, and even certain varieties of ants are comprised in the menu. Flesh of all sorts from that of the elephant to that of the rat is eaten with relish.[1] In the realm of feathered creatures the variety is equally comprehensive, ranging from the sparrow to the peacock, not even omitting the crow. Fish-paste, called in Karen "nya u" [2] but commonly given its Burmese name of "ngape," is greatly prized by the Karen, who think that it adds a very savory flavor to their food. On the plains they buy it from the Burmans from whom, it may be, they have adopted its use, but sometimes those living near streams or lakes make it for themselves.

146 263 Notwithstanding their inclusive diet, the Karen have no idea of what we call a balanced ration and, after all, are more or less undernourished. They also practice constantly the habit of betel chewing, which benumbs their sense of taste. For these reasons they crave highly seasoned foods. Chilies or red peppers are considered a necessity, while meats and powdered condiments of spices, tumeric, and chilies are used only to make the pungent curry sauce with which the cooked rice is flavored. Salt, which is obtained at the bazaars, is also used in seasoning.

---

[1] Messrs. Hose and MacDougal speak of some writer, whose name they do not give, as conveying the impression that the Karen do not eat the flesh of animals belonging to the cat tribe. I have not found this to be true. (*Vide* Hose and McDougal, *Pagan Tribes of Borneo*, Vol. II, 239).

[2] This word means literally "rotten fish."

19: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

Inasmuch as rice is the chief article of diet among the Karen, a few words should be said about its preparation. "Paddy," which is the grain before it has been cleaned for cooking, is brought home from the bins in which it has been stored and spread out on mats to dry in the sun. It is then pounded in mortars to rub off the outer husk. A second pounding removes the inner skin covering each grain and polishes the rice pure white. (See p. 68.) As cleaned rice does not keep as well as paddy, the natives pound out only enough to last a week or two. The kernels are washed in a basket with a sieve-like bottom and are then poured into a pot of boiling water. They are allowed to cook vigorously for ten minutes or less, until they swell and become soft enough to crush easily between the thumb and finger. The water is then poured off and the pot set back in the hot ashes to dry out any remaining water. When the rice is served, it remains whole, firm, and slightly hard. Soft boiled rice is most unpalatable to the Karen, who think it not so sustaining as the less cooked cereal. Nowadays the cooking is done in most places in earthen pots, which are bought from Burmese or Shan traders. These pots are of red unglazed clay, cost but a few annas, (one anna is equal to about two cents or an English penny), and last with care for some time.

Besides the rice used for ordinary meals there are many varieties of glutinous rice that are cooked or steamed on the plains for an early morning meal or for special feasts. The steamers are made like the Burmese pots, but with a number of small holes in the bottom. These are placed over vessels of boiling water, the steam of which rises through the openings and permeates the grain. I have been told that when a rare feast is desired, the rice is steamed over a vessel in which a chicken is boiling, and the rice becomes flavored with the fowl. Steamed glutinous rice is sometimes mixed with sessimum seeds and pounded in a mortar until it becomes a sticky paste. This mixture is called "to me to pi."

It is reported that long ago, before the Karen had as much dealing with the Burmese as they do now, they cooked their rice in joints of bamboo. At any rate, this is their present practice when out in the forest. The hunter or wayfarer in the jungle puts his rice into a large joint of bamboo, which he stands at the edge of a little fire until the contents are sufficiently boiled. The hard silicious sheathing of the bamboo easily withstands the heat of a single cooking. Once used, the joint is thrown away, for there are plenty more to be cut as occasion demands. Sometimes cooked rice

19: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

for a journey is carried in the same joint in which it was boiled. Certain kinds of bamboo, such as the thorny variety "wa hagu," which grows in low lands, impart a special flavor to the rice that is cooked in them. Rice deriving its taste from the thorny bamboo is thought to be one of the most delicious viands that can be obtained and is called "me taw." When certain kinds of bamboo bear fruit,

Pounding Paddy in a Mortar

which is at long intervals, their seeds are often cooked and eaten in place of rice.

The larger vegetables, like pumpkins, yams, etc., are cut up and boiled until soft. Green fruits and shoots are also cooked, although many spicy kinds of shoots and ripe fruits are generally eaten raw.

There are intervals when a village community lives only on rice eaten with a little salt, fish-paste gravy, and red peppers. After

19 Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1922 AFI Burma
Karen AF7

a fishing or hunting expedition, however, or when some feast is held, the people gorge themselves with as many kinds of meat or fish as they can obtain. Larger fish and the flesh of animals are cut up and cleaned before cooking. No part of an animal is wasted. The intestines, when properly cleansed and prepared, are considered especially toothsome. The best-liked meats are pork and venison. Birds, pigeons, and ducks are also regarded as good eating. Small birds are often cooked without other preliminaries than a hasty

THE FIREPLACE IN A HILL KAREN HOUSE
The housewife is watching the pot boil. Signs of approaching civilization are apparent, such as the enamel plate and the kerosene oil tin.

plucking of the feathers. Meats are ordinarily cooked with the oil pressed from sesame seeds and flavored with condiments more or less in the manner of Indian curries. For this purpose a larger or smaller quantity of the following spices are used: tumeric, ginger, cloves, cardamon seeds, and cinnamon bark, besides tamarind, lime-juice, and the inevitable salt and chili. Fishermen and hunters like to roast small game, fish, or strips of meat from larger animals between splints of bamboo hung near or over a camp fire. The Polynesian way of baking such foods is often employed, the fish, flesh, or fowl being wrapped in plantain leaves and buried in a pit, which is lined with stones made hot by having had a roaring fire

19: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

on them. Meat in excess of immediate needs is cut into narrow strips and dried on a rack over a fire. The strips are then covered with salt and stored away for future use. Fish are dried in the same way. Such preserved foods are eaten by the workers in the fields or help to furnish forth the repasts on a journey. In the hills, so far as I have observed, the Karen does not fry his food; but on the plains, where he has more or less taken up Burmese ways, cooking food in fat has become somewhat common. This is usually done outside the house, however, because the Karen, like the Burmese and Shan, have a superstitious fear of the smell of cooking.

While cooking is preeminently the women's work, it seems that nearly every man can cook and does on occasion prepare his own food. I have eaten many a tasty meal prepared by Karen men, who considerately took pains to have clean utensils and to use only such condiments as they knew white men were likely to relish.

The serving of food among the Karen is a simple matter. The rice is emptied into a tray, the meats or vegetables are put in little bowls, and all are set on a mat on the floor. The members of the household squat around this "family board" and eat with the hand. They pour gravy from the meat, fish, or other side-dishes on the rice, work it in with the fingers, and convey the food in compact lumps to their mouths. Among the more primitive large plantain leaves often serve as trays and plates. The Karen on the plains use separate dishes of china or enamel-ware, which are readily obtained in the bazaar. These are set on a low table, standing no more than six inches above the floor. This manner of serving is in vogue among the Burmese. There is not much sociability about a Karen meal. Each person attends to his eating until he has finished, when he rises, rinses off his hands, quenches his thirst with a drink of water, and withdraws to sit down, or leaves the house without formality. The members of a family generally eat together; but if guests are present, the women usually wait until the men are served. Large quantities of food are prepared for wedding and funeral-feasts, which, as a rule, the men and women partake of separately without particular order or arrangement.

The safety-match is nowadays the common means employed by Karens in producing fire; but formerly the flint and steel were used, as they were all over the world in the early days of the nineteenth century and before. A simpler, and probably indigenous, method was by the friction of two dry pieces of bamboo. One

19: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

piece was sawn back and forth through a groove cut crosswise on the crest of another, the latter being a half-section of large bamboo laid over a quantity of shavings or punk. The heat thus generated in a minute or two produced smoke and a flame, and the tinder caught the blaze. A generation or two ago Karens carried fire pistons, when on a journey, to light their pipes. The description of this simple mechanism, which has been given to me, is that it was a bone or metal cylinder with a small hole at one end into which a tight-fitting piston was driven by a sharp blow and then quickly withdrawn. The air within was thus sufficiently compressed and heated to ignite a bit of tinder at the bottom of the cylinder.[3]

Milk does not form a part of the diet of the Karen people any more than it does of some other Oriental races. There is little with which to feed babies whose mothers can not nurse them. However, it is a comparatively rare thing for a mother not to be able to nurse her child. The first solid food given to babies is rice that has first been masticated by the mother. The kind of food eaten by the parents is given to their children as soon as they cry for it. This, I think, is one of the most fruitful sources of the high death rate among Karen infants.

The people in the hills eat three meals a day, one soon after rising, one at mid-day, and the third in the evening after the work is done. On the plains an early "chota hazri" of glutinous rice is sometimes, but not always, taken.[4] The regular morning meal comes somewhere between eight and ten o'clock and the afternoon repast between three and five. Tea is coming to be much used among the Karen, either the native pickled tea which is imported by the Burmese from the Shan states, or the Chinese and India teas which are now sold all over the country. The Karen drink their tea without milk and often put in a little salt in place of sugar. Coffee is used to some extent in the Karen hills and is drunk without milk, unless some one has brought home a can of condensed milk from town, this preparation being considered a most delicious sweetmeat.

Alcoholic beverages are brewed or distilled among the Karen. A kind of rice beer is made by allowing boiled rice to stand in jars of water and ferment. Old fermented rice is left in a jar, and fresh rice water is poured upon it. After standing several days, it ac-

[3] The fire piston is used by the Bana in Borneo. It is also found throughout the Malay Peninsula and in Sumatra: Hose and MacDougall, *Pagan Tribes of Borneo*.

[4] "Chota hazri" is the Hindustani word used throughout India for the little breakfast of toast and tea or coffee that Europeans take immediately on rising.

19: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

served their tabus they prospered, but when they neglected them they suffered adversity, it is alleged.

Marriage of a Karen with a person of another race was formerly strictly forbidden. This exclusiveness kept the racial stock pure and unmixed. In recent times the prohibition has not been rigorously enforced. Hence, the barriers between the Karen on the one hand and the Burmese and Shan on the other have been somewhat weakened, betokening—it must be confessed—a moral looseness that was unknown before. The village elders have always maintained that marriages outside of the tribe ("taw leu hko") were not good, although such unions have not been lately tabued. Marriages between members of the same tribe or of the same village, providing the parties concerned are not more closely related than cousins, are permitted. To marry a relative closer than a cousin would be incest, and all the tribes forbid such unions. On the day of a wedding in a village the inhabitants are forbidden to labor.

Adultery and fornication are under strict tabu, except in the Red Karen tribe,[2] the belief among the other tribes being that these sins are offensive to the "Bgha" [3] and destroy the productiveness of the fields, the "Lords of the earth" withholding their favor from the crops when they find that such deeds have been committed. In making their annual feast to these deities, the Bwe tribe formerly required those who had been guilty of uncleanness during the year to confess their sins and did not permit them to come near the sacrificial altars.

A number of prohibitions are connected with birth. One of the Sgaw precepts forbids pregnant women to eat the flesh of the curious monkey-tiger *(Ictides ater)*, bitter herbs, and the long smooth pod called alligator's tongue. Before the men adopted the modern fashion of wearing their hair short, the husband of a woman who was with child was not permitted to trim his locks, for fear of shortening the life of his expected offspring. During the first six days following a birth the custom of the Paduang denies to the father the right of associating or even speaking with any one, except his own family. He alone cares for the mother and child during the period named.[4] The purpose of thus secluding the father is to prevent the transmission of the danger and weakness

[2] See Dr. Mason's account in the *Journal, Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 1866.

[3] This is true in those localities where the "Bgha" are regarded as the family penates. In other localities, as among the Bwe, the offended powers were the "lords of the earth."

[4] Lieutenant E. W. Carrick, *Report on Bwe Expedition*, 1894-95, p. 23.

[5] E. B. Cross, J. A. O. S. (1854) Vol. IV, 298, ff. and D. C. Gilmore, Journ. Burma

the purpose of improving the conditions and keeping their crops from being ruined. Failure to observe this custom brings disappointment ("t' kle t htwa"), for one's labor will be worse than useless. On the plains, where they prepare a dirt threshing-floor after the Burman style, it used to be prohibited to drive a cart across it or to walk on it with shoes on. In other sections, where the threshing is done on a great mat, no one may step on it but the members of the family who take part in the work. The succulent shoots of vegetables, which are grown with the paddy, must not be cut with a sharp knife or other instrument, inasmuch as cutting would endanger the "k'la" or life principle of the paddy and scare away the demons that preside over the fields. Both the vegetables and their shoots, the latter being largely used for greens, must be plucked with the fingers. Another tabu prevents the eating of flesh during harvest-time. Any family who should transgress this precept would find, it is believed, that their supply of rice had vanished from the storage bin.

The following examples of tabus relating to domestic animals may be cited. If a sow or bitch has a litter composed only of females, they must all be killed. When less than three chicks are hatched from a nest of eggs, they must be killed. So also must the chick whose down dries fast to the feathers of the mother hen. A crowing hen is likewise doomed to death. These phenomena are supposed to be signs of weakness in the creatures concerned, for which some offended demon is responsible. Such weakness must not be allowed to spread.

Certain tabus contribute to preserve the integrity of the family through the female line. One of these prevents any outsider from entering a house where the family is celebrating the "Bgha" feasts. Indeed, a tabu debars from such gatherings the men who have married into the family, while those who are privileged to attend must remain in the house during the performance of the rites.

On the plains, where the Karen villagers build separate houses after the manner of the Burmans, persons are forbidden to drive their carts through the village road close enough to the houses to bump against the supporting posts. This tabu, which, in the eyes of a Westerner, partakes of the nature of a town ordinance, is enforced upon the offender by the imposing of a fine, namely, four annas in money or a fowl, payable to the heads of the household con-

25: Ferrars E-5 (ca. 1890) 1901 APl Burma
Karen 4P7

241

[251]

336. KARENS CUTTING THEIR CROP.

such an extent that they destroy whole crops and stocks of corn and produce famine. Towards harvest time birds have to be scared again. The rice crop is generally ripe before the last rains fall. A chance break is taken advantage of to cut, dry, and thresh the corn, which is got under cover in a bin on the *taungya*, or *punzo*, as it is called when done with. The secondary crops ripen later. Cucumbers, pumpkins, marrows, brinjals, and other coarse vegetables, and sometimes tomatoes, are sown on the margins and along the pathways. In a good season the Karéns get about double the quantity of grain they need for living. The whole of the secondary crop is for trade. In the moist ravines they cultivate the betel-palm and betel-vine, and they have taken to orange gardening at the foot of the hills. They also collect the wild betel-vine and honey by climbing high trees (No. 362); the tree-ladder is made by driving bamboo spikes into the wood. The only honey of Burma is wild; but bees frequent the limestone caves to such a degree that in some places the right to collect honey and wax in them is farmed out. Honey sells for ten annas and wax for two and a half rupees a viss. The staple food of the Karéns is rice. They make a curry in the Burman way; with it they eat *ngapi*, salt fish or fresh fish, or the flesh of pig and deer, especially the "small deer" they trap at the *taungya*. They keep goats, poultry and pigs, which latter are the scavengers of the villages. But the chief purpose for which these animals are bred is to be killed and offered to the *nats*, who have to be propitiated on all occasions. At every village site and clearing for cultivation a

[438]

[222]

262

[231]

782

339. KAREN WOMAN COOKING.